

**Between Protection and Oppression.
The Narrative of the Cultural Border and the Making of Bonds**

Aleksandra Kunce
Institute of Cultural and Interdisciplinary Studies
University of Silesia

ABSTRACT

In the essay "Between Protection and Oppression. The Narrative of the Cultural Border and the Making of Bonds," the author considers the question of what can nowadays be expected from the narrative of the cultural border. Is it still possible to contribute something new to the description of the borders? Where could one search for new ways of narrating the border, ones that would not only constitute a novelty but also affect the realm of relations?

The world of culture can be perceived both from the perspective of the production of borders and of mechanisms dissolving their impenetrability. The author points to the constant functionalization of the border between protection and oppression. This leads to the indication that the cultural narrative of the border should bring forth a formula capable of redefining a human being. The description of the borders is supposed not only to yield a certain view of the world but also to create a space of bonds that we are not yet able to imagine at the moment of creating. The narrative has to be lived: it is to serve the practices of living.

Developing a 'good narrative' in intellectual terms means making sure that the story of the border is not about drawing an extensive map with neatly divided territories; instead, its task is to trace individual microhistories and microexperiences.

Keywords: The Narrative, Border, Microexperience

Meditating on the border is crucial to the humanities inasmuch as their task is to consider the boundaries of genres, languages and discourses, the boundaries of cognition and understanding, the processes of displacement and erasure of communal borders, as well as the most disturbing notion of borders or limits – those of the human being and corresponding ethic. There is no denying that the cultural boundaries and borders erected by ethnic thinking have become one of the basic figures of reflection in the field of social anthropology.

It is therefore essential to pose a question of what can be expected from the current narrative of the cultural border. Can something new be still contributed to the description of the borders? Where could one search for new ways of narrating the border, ones that would not only constitute a novelty but also affect the realm of relations?

In the Dialectic of Protection and Oppression

The presence of borders and boundaries in the cultural narrative has long been taken for granted. Without paying attention to borders, anthropology could not have conceived of the world in terms of distinct cultures, separated from one another and placed at a distance on the mental map. The world of cultures was thus viewed once as differentiated into structural organizations linked only by the universal logical structure of the human mind, as Claude Lévi-Strauss liked to put it (1964; 1966). Even earlier it had been represented as a realm made up of cultural circles with distinctly marked boundaries, which found its best expression in the conceptions of Fritz Graebner or Bernard Ankerman (Barnard 2002: 47-60). It was also symbolically construed as a world of separate cultural systems, an image powered and sustained by the philosophy implicit in Bronislaw Malinowski's (1984) or Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown's respective methods (2013). It is a world that we have become familiar with reading maps handed down to us by anthropologists who

used to draw neat divisions between the territories of different tribes, as was done by Fredrik Barth in his map of peoples inhabiting the north of Pakistan (1982: 10). Finally, it is an image of the world that needs boundaries for the mere purpose of documenting cultural diversity, as evidenced by Clifford Geertz's early works (1973; 1981). Clearly, the world of cultures could not have come into existence without reference to the figure of the border.

There is however not escaping the fact that anthropology has long worked to mythologize the condition of separation, as has repeatedly been pointed out by postcolonial theorists (Said 1978; Young 2001; Trouillot 1991: 17-44). It has mythologized the hierarchy of cultures by sketching typologies and drawing maps of clans, tribes, castes and nations (Scott 1992: 371-94). But the mythologizing project was often incompatible with the intuitive boundaries drawn by local native communities or the colonial authorities. On the one hand, the anthropological image of the world worked to erase alien borders imposed by colonial divisions by highlighting the significance of tribal boundaries which went across the political organization of the world. On the other hand, the anthropological view helped to strengthen colonial borders by promoting the category of the tribe (one capable of uniting scattered groups of people) instead of that of the clan (as clans were too differentiated and difficult to translate into the terms of European and American thinking on nation and state). Postcolonial criticism is however an insufficient tool to explore the subject in its depth.

This is because underlying the processes of differentiation and enclosure is a powerful human need to become separated from the other, to distance oneself from what is alien and mark the distinction in space, to secure one's possession and consolidate territorial power. And the power is clearly buttressed not only by psychological and biological ties but also by cultural relations. A human being is a resident of the local space, and the fact makes him or her constantly produce new boundaries. One can wonder, as Barth does, whether the boundary replaces existing differences and identities or whether it actually contributes to their making (1998). Perhaps it is the case that every boundary is drawn much too hastily and a little bit prematurely. The imperative to differentiate and enclose is however universally present.

From that perspective the world can be perceived as a ceaseless **production** of boundaries which struggle for what is in-between and work to create a caesura just in order to evade the spectre of monotony. The production work is a basic human capability. Good boundaries naturally search for ways of marking the space by reverting to geographical features such as mountains, rivers and the ocean which do not allow human beings to dissolve in homogeneity and secure their condition of being rooted in the familiar and unique. At the same time, boundaries are drawn in the name of the unity of those that are brought together as a community of being situated "on the same side of the border" (Bauman 2000: 92-111; 151-152). The act of drawing boundaries contributes to the symbolic violence implicit in the subjugation and control of territories, people and ways of thinking. Borders are tantamount to **power**, to put it in Michel Foucault's manner (1990). Borders serve the purposes of conquest, Michel de Certeau wrote, since it is the one in power who divides and separates, his or her certitude stemming from the evidence of the **map** (1988: 91-130).

The border is in the service of total violence that unifies territories and manages the imposed unity. The main function of the border is exercising control. Even more, the very processes of shaping space and exercising the power of authority assume there is a certain **geometry and stereometry of borders**. A human being produces borderline forms reflecting his or her style of thinking – forms which are simple in terms of their structure and yet complicated as far as the spaces established on both sides of the border are concerned. To rethink a geometry of borders is to rethink a geometry of one's own thinking about the human world. There is something like a geometry of the universal and a geometry of the local, but, admittedly, they hardly ever get into contact with each other.

The world viewed as a production of boundaries calls for something more. Indeed, it can be seen as capable of **producing ever more porous boundaries** and erasing demarcation lines for the sake of the fluidity of living. The question remains which cultural boundaries are beneficial and close to the human being – perhaps the ones whose porousness is not destructive and which are hardly noticeable instead of being an instrument of oppression. The second question concerns the

nature of boundaries – which of them are anchored in oppression that gives rise to acts of their questioning and dismantling in the practices of living? The problem of the border caught in **the dialectic of protection and oppression** is not sufficiently tackled by the current anthropological narrative as it goes beyond the latter's framework, spilling over into social and ethical discourses. Culture is constantly oscillating between a sense of familiarity and safety, and a strong tendency to erect walls, entrenchments and entanglements. It seems that the need to rethink the dialectic of protection and oppression is particularly pronounced today on account of a unceasing influx of refugees, mass economic migration, numerous conflicts over the existing borders, campaigns of hostility aimed at protecting native populations from immigrants, and the overall difficulty in organizing solidary actions based on ethical bonds.

Let us now focus upon the contemporary thinking on the border in the cultural narrative. What does it embrace? Which thematic strands does it weave together?

The cultural border or boundary emerges as an important figure in the following areas of theory and social practice:

1. **The rhetoric of the border** – the ideology and language of the border: Us vs. Them, one's folk vs. the others, and the rules of dissolving the borders. The significance of the border: what does it communicate? How does it work to produce difference? What kind of bonds does it create? What divisions and misunderstandings does it bring? How does it strengthen or blur identity?

2. **The border as a matter of concern to the collective mythologies of a community.** Actions that stem from these mythologies assume the appearance of struggle, efforts at maintaining power, expansion, notions of recovery, or nationalist symbolism, but they also feature civilizational concern over the limits of "our civilization" construed as the human world. The concern also poses a question of a good, or favourable boundary as a caesura in time and space, or a division in social geometry. At the same time, it extends to the problem of rites of passage, or any kind of maturity, secret society or shamanic initiation that helps to legitimize an act of transgression with the community's consent and enables the oscillation between what is human and what is inhuman.

3. **The social negotiation of borders** – a process of redefining and establishing differences between oneself and the others, and a confrontation of individual choices with collective reasons. An important problem here is **a negation of boundaries**, resulting from the affirmation of one's lack of roots and a sense of freedom to proceed in space. It also amounts to a negation of borders as what sets a limit to individual liberty and invalidates free choice. The affirmation of **the dissolution of borders** points to the persistence of various manifestations of fluidity: notions introduced by multi-, inter-, cross-, or trans-. A border is not a line and it cannot be tantamount to an enclosed area. The precision of boundaries is what is currently losing ground. We tend to enumerate the beneficiaries or culprits of the situation in one breath: the Internet, a largely economic design of modern times, a corporational rather than national make-up of the world, social mobility and migration, post-national and multi-ethnic ways of contemporary living, and individual identity choices. These phenomena amount to the praise of crossings, intersections and couplings. They are also about redefining the former ethnic boundaries (in the ancient sense of *ethnos* as race, religion, territory, language, kinship and mythic background) which are to be replaced by **new boundaries**, those of the sex and gender, sexuality, everyday practices and styles of living. What we can observe is thus a growth of subtle differences in place of old ethnic or racial boundaries.

4. **The decline of the anthropological rhetoric** – one that used to produce classifications, typologies, and distinctions, that used to draw patterns of culture and cultural boundaries, and that, as a result, yielded static images of cultures and subcultures, or national and regional cultures. It is also a decline of all strategies defined by the ideology of hierarchizing and subordinating cultures. Finally, it is a demise of the style of thinking based on the clear-cut distinction between the project of *Kulturwissenschaften*, cultural studies, and that of *Naturwissenschaften*, or sciences, and intent on separating two distinct methodologies in their striving to describe the limits of what is understood and known. The border is also involved in the question of progress and transgression in medicine and in the biological attempt at redefining the parameters of humanity.

5. **Border as an ethical commitment** – a commitment to engage with the Other. Once reconsidered, a border emerges as a call to transform social practices. The ethical understanding of the border leads to the realization that beyond the boundaries that were supposed to separate us, there is a possibility of communication based on the reference to the idea of human unity and longing for a community grounded in ethics. Due to frequent incidents of separation, for instance for ethnic reasons, one can develop sensitivity to the question of the other and a need for hospitality towards the other, as we become conscious of the same limits of our being and of our own cultural temporariness. Rethinking the border's capability to produce bonds – which becomes possible through acts of their questioning or recognizing the benefits of separation – is a major task facing the contemporary discourse on culture.

Thought and Action: the Realm of Bonds

Let us repeat the question now: what could be expected from the current discussion of the border? Where are we to search for new ways of narrating the border, ones that would not only constitute a novelty but also affect the realm of relations?

We should expect the border narratives to be at the same time responsible cultural practices that constitute as such **a formula capable of redefining a human being** and his or her communal commitments. A responsible narrative is able to shape interpersonal relationships in ethical terms. Viewing a human being from the local perspective may bring forth two palpable consequences. The first is that the description of the world should simultaneously be a strategy for shaping sensible human relations. It seems to be of much importance to the local thinking because what we strive to create with words is at the same time a contribution to the making of the world close to us. The second consequence is that the narrative should readily translate into action. The notion of cultural activity and the formula of socially engaged anthropology or cultural discourse that is capable of transforming everyday practices is a promising step forward.

An intellectual gesture should equal an ethical gesture, one that entails intervention in reality. It should affect and transform the image of the world and concomitant social practices in the way that will make them conducive to mutual understanding. Such an idea leads to a realization that the anthropological and cultural narrative that is favourably disposed towards the others and results in their welfare is always an **educational project**. What is more, it is a project that is locally experienced and implemented. The description of the borders is supposed not only to yield a certain view of the world but also to create **a realm of bonds** that we are not yet able to imagine at the moment of creating. The narrative has to be lived: it is to serve the practices of living. **Thought should translate into action**, one that prompts us to trace affinities, as well as positive differences.

Therefore, the border narratives that recur within the space of culture and politics should be read not just as another instance of story-telling but as a dynamic and suggestive attempt to search for the human being in the experience of vulnerability over against what is systematic, official and enclosed. Developing a 'good narrative' in intellectual terms means making sure that the story of the border is not about drawing an extensive map with neatly divided territories; instead, its task is to trace individual **microhistories and microexperiences**. Significantly, the common human experience can be found in the fragility and tiredness of a single human as he or she is seen crossing the border, arrested at or hunted over the border, on the move or building a home along or on the border. This ethical dimension needs to be stressed: the mythologies of wandering developed by communities are mostly hyperbolic, yet an individual experience of being on the way is microscopic and vulnerable. The border shows our human experience as deeply fragile. Culture is an expression of fragility, as all things human are fragile by definition: this is a crucial lesson learned from the border.

In this way, a border in the 'good narrative' is reframed so that it gives rise to a call for the transformation of everyday practices on both sides of the border, at many points of the border, and even of the border within ourselves. It means recognizing the fact that borderline thinking begins on

the border but extends even further and we must constantly remind ourselves of the fragility and tiredness of a human being who is both dominated and **defeated** by the borders. It is however also about recognizing these borders as a good local caesura without which a human being would be threatened by the unification with the Same. **Favourable borders** keep a human being on the good and beneficial side of living, exercising positive authority in the realm of human meanings. The wrong way of subjecting to the power of the border produces identities that are violently hyperbolized, with the emphasis placed not on the difference but on the unity and self-identity of what is one's own. Such borders produce monoliths and wholes: they result in totalization and homogeneity.

The latter notion of the border is best exemplified by the infamous wall that is still a favourite construction of power erected as a protection against newcomers and has re-emerged in recent years in Hungary, on the border with Serbia, or in Israel, on the border with Jordan. A wall reinstates fighting. It is a simple construction that gives rise to incidents of cruelty on both sides of the border. The act of erecting a wall is a gesture towards designing future structures of social terrorism. The problem is however that the construction of the wall becomes a necessity as there seems to be no way to communicate with the other and a sense of safety and peace has long been disturbed. As the narrative about the community and its hope for the communication with and respect for the others has failed, what remains is only a wall as a sensible way of separating enemies and assuring one's own safety. It is a short-term policy that has no future. Still, not building a wall would be an equally desperate attempt to hold on to the utopian view of relating cultures in the world where people no longer wish to relate to each other.

An equally monstrous exemplification of the border is provided by refugee camps that are marked by enclosure. In the refugee camp the politically terrified and oppressed is transformed into a controlled mass of powerlessness. There is no longer any notion of culture or place: here means nowhere, to be controlled by the centre managing political territories. It would however be naïve to think that the lack of control over the powerless and rejected group of people, no longer constituting a community, does not pose any threat to other localities situated beyond the border that need to be shielded. In the refugee camp what is prioritized is mere politics.

The border narrative is threatened not just by difference and displacement, and certainly not by a series of subtle differentiations, but by the idea of unity and violent opposition that is aggressive in its scheme of clear-cut distinctions: either identity or difference, either one or many.

It must be remembered that the story of the border we tell extends to borderline practices in the realm of culture. Each narrative and social practice that is capable of producing and sustaining boundaries turns into an educational project. The question remains **how to find the golden mean between different ways of functionalizing borders, favourable and oppressive ones**. The clue can be found in keeping memory of all possible aspects of borders. It would be a memory of power abuse connected with the borders but also a memory of their good role as a caesura capable of situating us 'somewhere there.' Borders accumulate a memory of the geometry and mental space but also an experience of being a winner or loser. At each point of the border, whether it is a trivial or violent part of the story, one can witness the capacity to turn into either the most monstrous form or the most friendly way of limiting space possible. It is no wonder that what gets coupled in the border are both protection and oppression, subjection and freedom, or, last but not least, humility and pride. The experience of oneself and the other on the border is always about the threat constantly posed to the human being. Each and every border makes manifest a communal experience of humility. It is where a human being gets exposed in his or her fragile locality.

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